

Latino Engagements with Islamic Scriptures*

Harold D. Morales
Morgan State University
Baltimore, Maryland

The *shahadah* is based on two passages in the Qur'an: 37:35 and 48:29, it is a public proclamation that "there is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God." It is whispered into the ears of infants by Muslim parents and should be the last words spoken before death. It is also an initiation ritual for those not raised as Muslims. It marks a redirection, a fresh start, a wiping away of all previous sins. Most Muslims do not believe that human nature is predisposed toward sin. There is no doctrine of original sin in Islam. Instead, it is believed that humans sin because they are forgetful by nature. People are said to be easily distracted by material goods, careers, and relationships and therefore constantly forget what is most important: God. To remain on the straight path toward God and not deviate from it, people need constant reminders. Some Latinos believe they have forgotten their Islamic roots, both cultural and spiritual, and that the *shahadah*, like so many other Islamic practices, is an important form of *zikr* or remembrance. It is thus a publically witnessed

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testimony of an individual's commitment to a morally disciplined life.

And it was with this in mind that Mariela proclaimed on a Sunday afternoon to a community at the Omr Ibn al-Kittab mosque next to USC and Exposition Park in Los Angeles: "*lā ilāha illallāh, muḥammadur-rasūlu- llāh. No hay más dios que Alá y Muhammad es su profeta. There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God.*" After repeating these words, Mariela looked up at the group of individuals who had lined up to welcome and greet her as a fellow Muslim for the first time. She had been taught that this was a new beginning, a clean slate in which previous mistakes had been forgiven. Others had described their experience after taking *shahadah* as if an unbearable burden had been lifted and as now having a clear sense of purpose and direction. Some include the presence of angels in the retelling of their initiation rite. Like so many before her, tears of joy and of hope for a brighter future began to run down Mariela's face.

Among those who greeted Mariela after the *shahadah*, one person told her that he had been given a Spanish language translation of the Qur'an several years ago and that he would happily bring it to her as soon as he could. He was neither Latinx nor did he understand Spanish; the Spanish Qur'an was for her. The conversation between the two was in English, so he must have been aware that Mariela did not necessarily need a Spanish language translation of the Qur'an when so many English ones were available. But it might be nice to have Mariela's Latinx identity reaffirmed at this critical juncture in her religious life. As soon as the man with the Spanish Qur'an left, a member of the Latino Muslim community quickly intervened and informed Mariela that she would be given a

beautiful four-volume copy of the Muhammad Asad Spanish language translation of the Qur'an. This translation, Mariela was told without much explanation, was better. Still wiping the tears from her eyes, Mariela smiled and warmly embraced her religious mentor. The *shahadah* had been performed, Mariela's new religious identity was celebrated in the mosque's upper room, and her initiation into Islam was completed. Mariela's life as a Latina Muslim and her interaction with Latinx, Muslim, and Latino Muslim communities and institutions, however, was far from over.

This article provides a brief introduction to Latino Muslim (as most self-identify) engagements with Islamic scriptures based on my broader work on race, religion, media, and Latino Muslims in the U.S.¹ In particular, I emphasize the use of these scriptures for ritual purposes such as in the public proclamation described above alongside other theological engagements. Latino Muslims have been forming religious communities since the 1970's and have undergone a series of changes in organizational visions and activities. Nevertheless, there has been a constant reference to a unifying identity narrative centered on the history of Islam in Spain and the continuation of Islamic influences on Latinx identities. This narrative includes references to Latinx family structures, cuisines, arts, and the Spanish language as being influenced by Islamic and Arab culture and language. The often repeated Qur'anic and Arabic phrase, *alhamdulillah* is for example noted to be the etymological root of the Spanish language phrase *ojalá* (hopefully).² Thus, in addition to providing an overview of Latino Muslim engagements with Islamic scriptures, I also engage the pervasive theme of a familiarity between Latinidad and Islam within Latino Muslim identity narratives.

After taking *shahadah*, an individual is required to pray five times a day, and the moral community which they have entered is to provide support during this transitional period and throughout the new Muslim's life. These prayers will themselves include a recitation of the Qur'an's opening chapter, "Al-Fatiha" (The Opening):

In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate: praise belongs to God, the Lord of the Worlds, the Merciful, the Compassionate; Master of the Day of Judgment, You do we worship and You do we call on for help; guide us on the Straight Path, the path of those whom You have blessed, not of those who earn your anger nor those who go astray."³

Scriptural passages such as "Al-Fatiha" are most often engaged by Latino Muslims during their five daily prayers. Prescribed by the Qur'an and exemplified by the Prophet, these prayers are a remedy to a sort of moral amnesia. Their recitation will conjure up a remembrance of what is most important and thereby guide the individual on to "the Straight Path." Members of the community that witnessed the *shahadah* will support each other, invite each other to prayer, meditate on the teachings of the Qur'an, and help each other to live a good life.

For Latino Muslims who proclaim the *shahadah* as an initiation ritual, it is a public reclamation of an essential truth that had been forgotten or ignored through European colonial processes. It is also a testimony of how the individual has recovered their purpose in life. Finally, the *shahadah* also marks a kind of inclusion into a family of believers. It is an embrace of and into the *ummah* or

community of Muslims and the beginning of a new narrative. "I could smell the mercy and the sweetness of heaven, felt the presence of God in my torn, sick heart," writes Gomez, "I felt a clean brightness in my new way of life. My life was ready for the next journey on earth, the journey to Paradise."⁴ Equipped with a sense of moral direction, hope, and joy, many Latino Muslims describe a new narrative yet to be written. It will be about a new earthly journey or quest, one that, with support from their new moral community, and if all goes well, *insha Allah*, "God Willing" - they would say - will end in Paradise.

Though the "Al-Fatiha" scriptural passage is engaged mostly in daily practice, it is also engaged at a theoretical level by Qur'anic study groups such as a weekly one hosted by the Los Angeles Latino Muslim Association. On several such occasions, the group has focused on the scripture's reference to two of the names or attributes of God from an Islamic tradition which holds that there are ninety-nine. Over an hour is dedicated to learning about the difference between the two names, *Ar Rahman*, the Most Gracious and *Ar Rahim* The Most Merciful. These are the two names or attributes of God invoked in the *basmala*, the invocation that opens most Qur'anic passages. Both Grace (sometimes translated as Compassion) and Mercy are capitalized by many Latino Muslims because they understand each not as simply adjectives, but as proper nouns, they are two of the ninety-nine names of God in Islam.⁵

These attributes or names of God, should not, however, be understood as composing different parts of God. Instead, the exceedingly important doctrine of *Tawhid*, the Oneness of God, renders God not only as unique and as having no counterparts, but also as indivisible. One of God's names or attributes cannot be

considered apart from another, they are one and the same and together the collection of ninety-nine is meant to help believers better understand and describe the Oneness of God.⁶ The modern poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal interpreted the doctrine of *Tawhid* as a critique of the separation between the secular and sacred.⁷ The doctrine of the oneness of God and the correlated view that Islam is not simply a private religion but a way of life, inspired the Latino Muslim group La Alianza Islamica to critique any separation between spirituality on the one hand and social service and political activism on the other.

Prior to founding the Alianza Islamica, Yahya Figueroa, Rahim Ocasio, and Ibrahim González, had been school friends in New York City. They had grown up in a revolutionary center of political activism and the struggle for civil rights during the 1960's. They were young, but socially conscious. At a 2016 event in Houston, Texas, Yahya talked about how he grew up in New York's barrios, how "gangs" were everywhere, ran the corners and educated the people in various "street philosophies." "I was a part of it since I was a kid, you had no choice, know what I mean." As a young teenager, Yahya joined the Young Lords just as the Puerto Rican street gang was expanding and transforming itself into a civil rights and Puerto Rican independence movement under the leadership of Jose Cha Cha Jimenez. It was in the 1970's that Figueroa, Ocasio, and González together searched for different ways to join the fight against civil and human rights violations. "We sought other outlets," recounted Ocasio, "and came upon Islam. We became serious young men seeking to elevate ourselves within our society. We got this from Islam."⁸ They entered the 125th Street mosque in Harlem and took *shahada*, publically proclaiming that "there is no god but God." "Islam," added González, "introduced spiritual

practices that were different from the Catholic upbringing of many Latinos, such as five daily prayers, fasting, and a more direct connection with God... Prayer was the first thing that brought me closer to being a Muslim. It became a source of strength and peace.”⁹ For Figueroa, Ocasio, and González, Islam provided a means to engage in both an inner/spiritual struggle and an outer activist one.

Though often misrepresented as “holy war,” *jihad* is referred to in the Qur’an as the struggle to be a good Muslim, to follow the scriptural laws, and draw nearer to God. A second and lesser form of *jihad* is on the other hand referred to in the Qur’an as an external struggle to bring about just social conditions.¹⁰ Only when the Prophet Muhammad and his followers were persecuted and tortured in Mecca and their very existence threatened in Medina, was it deemed appropriate to engage in military battle: “... and drive them away from wherever they drove you away - for oppression is even worse than killing...” (Qur’an 2:191 - English translation by M. Asad). Many Muslims throughout the world also engage in external struggle through political activism and social service. In fact, the Qur’an is believed to have been revealed as a reminder or corrective to social injustices that had resulted from moral ignorance. The quest or struggle to bring about a just society through equity and charity is a core and reoccurring theme of the Qur’an: “Hence, O my people, [always] give full measure and weight, with equity, and do not deprive people of what is rightfully theirs, and do not act wickedly on earth by spreading corruption” (Qur’an 11:85 - English translation by M. Asad).

“We didn’t want to give up the struggle,” said Ocasio in regard to their social activism, “so we looked to different places. Islam represented a place for us to be part of a larger community. When we realized that within Islam

there was every spectrum of people, regardless of class, regardless of race, we were attracted to that universal principle of human interaction and communion with the divine.”¹¹ Like others who felt trapped and out-casted in the margins between two worlds, Figueroa, Ocasio, and González searched for guidance and a community to belong to. Through Islamic spirituality and its promotion of universal inclusion and its severe critique of American racism, they found a way to cultivate their inner sense of purpose and to struggle for their outer social dignity. Islam was for them a *jihad*, that is, it was an internal moral struggle and an external social activism.

Ocasio, Figueroa, and Gonzalez therefore went on to found the Alianza Islamica as a unique group that linked social service programs to their propagation of Islam with a distinctively Latinx inflection. *Dawah*, the propagation of Islam, is a religious mandate for Muslims. The Qur’an instructs Muslims to invite “[all mankind] unto thy Sustainer’s path with wisdom and goodly exhortation” (Qur’an 16:125, English translation by M. Asad). People who received help from the Alianza were also invited to learn about Islamic beliefs, practices, and history. The history lessons were therefore a form of *dawah* that also celebrated the link between Islamic Spain and Latinx identity. The goal was to help Latinxs understand Islam as familiar and positive rather than as something foreign and strange.

Under Figueroa’s leadership, the Alianza developed programs that combined Islamic spirituality and social service. In the Spanish Harlem then the Bronx, the group held classes on physical and spiritual health, provided community assistance and information on AIDS, and communed weekly for prayer, sermons, and meals. When no other Islamic leaders would bury Muslims who died

from AIDS for fear of stigma, Figueroa did. The Alianza celebrated weddings, shared *halal* Puerto Rican food with each other, and held music and poetry gatherings. Through creative interactions, the Alianza had developed a distinctive way of being both Latinx and Muslim at the same time. *Convivencia*, working with diversity, was understood by the Alianza as yet another characteristic they had inherited from Al- Andalus, Islamic Spain. And which they tried to practice in their daily lives and lived engagement with scriptures.

Though Latino Muslim communities have undergone several waves of communal and organizational changes since the Alianza Islamica, the Los Angeles Latino Muslim Association, and others, the familiarity between Latinidad and Islam continues to be a central and nearly ubiquitous identity narrative amongst current and diverse Latino Muslim communities. The refusal to distinguish between religious piety and social service and political activism, however, remains an intensely debated point of contention amongst these groups. Many have preferred to present themselves as a-political in a *post-9/11* context that is often categorized as Islamophobic and even more so now in during the Trump presidency. It thus remains to be seen how such diverse approaches to Islamic scriptures by varied Latino Muslim communities will impact the manner in which they are engaged by broader Latinx, Muslim, and other groups throughout the Americas and beyond.

Endnotes

¹ See Harold Morales, *Latino and Muslim in America: Race, Religion, and the Making of a New Minority* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) for the author's monograph which details his broader engagements with Latino Muslim communities in the U.S. For more on the use of scriptures by Latino Muslims, see also Hjamil A. Martínez-Vázquez *Latina/O Y Musulmán: The Construction of Latina/O Identity among Latina/O Muslims in the United States* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2010).

² See Aidi Hisham, "Olé to Allah: New York's Latino Muslims," *Africana*, November 11, 1999.

³ Qur'an 1:1-7 from John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

⁴ Walter Gomez, "Conversion Story." *HispanicMuslims.com*, accessed March 5, 2016, <http://hispanicmuslims.com/stories/waltergomez.html>.

⁵ In *Approaching the Qur'an*, Michael Sells writes: "This phrase is frequently translated, "In the name of God the Compassionate the Merciful," but traditional scholars have emphasized that the terms Rahman and Rahim are based upon an Arabic etymology linked to the word for womb (rahm). In addition, "mercy" as a quality of forgiveness has been strongly marked by Christian associations with the doctrine of original sin, whereas the Qur'an does not posit the notion of original sin. For these reasons, and for the purposes of euphony and alliteration, I have used the translation "the Compassionate the Caring" (*Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*. 2nd ed. [Ashland: White Cloud Press, 2007], 21). See also, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Miraj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 304-320.

⁶ See Reza Aslan, *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. Updated ed. (New York: Random House, 2011), 142-73; Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 165-78; Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an*, 18-19; Jane I. Smith, *Islam in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 6.

⁷ Muhammad Iqbal, "A Separate Muslim State in the Subcontinent." In *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives*, edited by John Donohue, and John Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 71-73.

⁸ Lisa Viscidi, "Latino Muslims a Growing Presence in America." *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, June 2003, p. 56.

⁹ Sameera Iqbal, "Hispanics and Islam," *ABC News*, November 20, 2007.

¹⁰ Ayatullah Mahmud Talegani, Ayatullah Murtada Mutahhari, Ali Shari'ati, Mehdi Abedi, and Gary Legenhausen, *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam* (North Haledon: Islamic Publications International, 2005), 2-3.

¹¹ Daniel J. Wakin, "Ranks of Latinos Turning to Islam Are Increasing." *New York Times*, January 2, 2002.



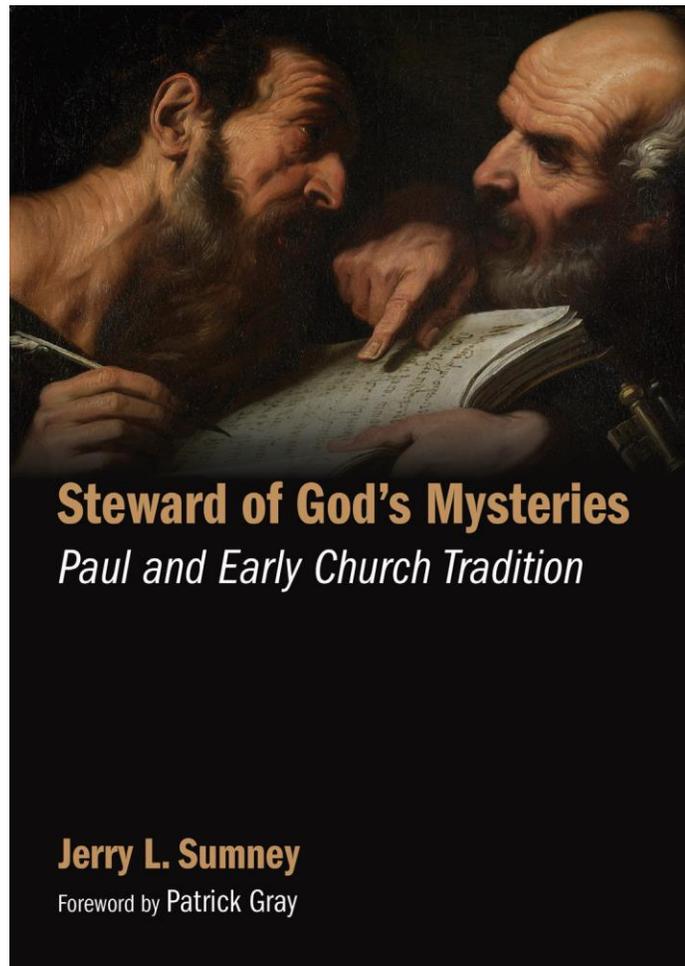
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One view that perennially springs up among biblical scholars is that Paul was the inventor of Christianity, or that Paul introduced the idea of a divine Christ to a church that earlier had simply followed the ethical teaching of a human Jesus. In this book Jerry Sumney responds to that claim by examining how, in reality, Paul drew on what the church already believed and confessed about Jesus.
Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ., 2017.